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ABSTRACT

In the past several years utilization of nonprofessionals in various extension programs has increased. In an attempt to determine what the role of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) nonprofessional is, the paper presents the findings of an analysis of critical incidents acquired from nonprofessional EFNEP extension aides working in selected areas of Kentucky in the course of an evaluation study. The specific purposes of the critical incident analysis were to: (1) identify the on-the-job behaviors and attitudes of EFNEP aides through critical incidents described by aides, (2) determine critical job requirements by tabulating and classifying the identified behaviors and attitudes, and (3) draw implications from these data for the training of EFNEP Extension Aides. Findings led to the following recommendations: (1) training should be conducted on a one-to-one or very small group basis and (2) any training program for nonprofessionals should focus attention on not only involving the trainees, but all levels of staff responsible for the success of the program. (Author/MW)

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CRITICAL JOB REQUIREMENTS FOR EXTENSION NONPROFESSIONALS

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CRITICAL JOB REQUIREMENTS FOR EXTENSION NONPROFESSIONALS

In the past several years Extension has increased the utilization of nonprofessionals in its varied programs with the most significant example being the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). Although Extension has recognized the significance and value of linking the nonprofessional with seemingly unreachable clients, it has nonetheless been faced with the problem of determining exactly what tasks the non-degreed person can, does or should assume in an agency where the role of an extension worker traditionally has been performed by college graduates.

This dilemma is not surprising because the term "nonprofessional" in and of itself denotes ambiguity. As Reissman has said: "Nonprofessional describes what he is not but does not clearly indicate what he is."[1] In an attempt to determine what the EFNEP nonprofessional is, this paper presents the findings of an analysis of critical incidents acquired from nonprofessional EFNEP extension aides working in selected areas of Kentucky in the course of an evaluation study.[2]

The specific purposes of the critical incident analysis were to: (1) identify the on-the-job behaviors and attitudes of EFNEP aides through critical incidents described by aides; (2) determine critical job requirements by tabulating and classifying the identified behaviors and attitudes; and (3) draw implications from these data for the training of EFNEP Extension Aides.

The critical incident approach was selected because: "...the critical incident technique, rather than collecting opinions, hunches, and estimates, obtains a record of specific behaviors from those in the best position to make the necessary observations and evaluations. The collection and tabulation of these observations make it possible to formulate the critical requirements of an activity. A list of critical behaviors provides a sound basis for making inferences as to requirements in terms of aptitudes, training and other characteristics."[3]

Study Methodology

The critical incident protocols were obtained during the course of comprehensive interviews with 40 female EFNEP aides who had been working on the job longer than three months.

The interviews took place either in the homes of the aides or in a private room provided by the local county extension office. The location of the interview was selected by the aide when the EFNEP coordinator for that area scheduled the interview for the investigators. In meetings and through letters the aides interviewed had been assured by various levels of extension administrators that the evaluation study was essentially a general program assessment, not an investigation of individual performance, and that the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses would be respected.

The critical incidents were obtained after the more structured interview had been completed by asking the aide to recall "a time when she felt exceptionally good or exceptionally bad about her work as an Extension aide and tell what happened."

Each incident was taped with permission of the aide as the incident was being recalled. Throughout the interviews the investigators took notes and after the initial and general comments were completed by the aide, the interviewers asked several questions designed to elicit comparable data in the event the critical incident did not include these. There was no attempt to limit the respondents in terms of how long ago their incidents happened, whether they described the effective before the ineffective incidents or vice versa, or whether their incidents were actually "effective" or "ineffective" as perceived by the investigator.

Before analysis, each incident was transcribed, reviewed and then edited in order to guarantee anonymity and assure readability.

Since there was no attempt to screen incidents during the interviews not all of the episodes described were considered useable by the investigators. Out of the 80 incidents recorded, 66 were found to be acceptable, of which 36 were classified as effective incidents and 30 ineffective. Incidents were considered effective if the aide felt the client was making obvious progress, the client had maintained a continued interest in the program, and/or the client was actively participating in the program. Ineffective incidents were those in which the aide felt there was no improvement evident, the client was disinterested, or there was lack of commitment to the program on the part of the client.

Of the useable incidents recorded there was a slight preference for relating the effective incidents before the ineffective ones at a ratio of 24 to 15.

The study was guided by Frank D. Alexander's Critical Incident Study of professional extension workers (county agents) in New York State[4] and the actual content analysis of each of the Kentucky incidents was based on the classifications developed by Alexander.

Findings and Conclusions

The aides stated in 64 of the 66 useable critical incidents recorded that making individual personal contact with the client as contrasted to group contact was critical to the effectiveness of the EFNEP delivery service. Almost the same number (60 out of 66) indicated that making a series of follow-ups was also critical to positively impact the client.

Using materials directed to the needs of the specific audience was cited in 39 of the 66 useable incidents as being significant to effective change.

Approximately 44% of the aides reported that taking the initiative or decided action with regards to non-food and nutritional incidents or situations was necessary for successful client relations vis-a-vis food and nutrition because effective action by the aide to meet the real or imagined client problem of the moment "spoke louder than words."

According to some of these aides, gaining the client's confidence and establishing credibility is equally as important as preparation in the field, i.e., detailed planning of activities, technical knowledge and/or experience.

More than four-fifths of the aides were aware of the attitudinal or psychological factors affecting their impact with a prospective client in that 83.3% identified enthusiasm, 80.6% identified a positive attitude in general, and 80.6% identified persuasiveness as being vital to their success with clients.

A significant number of aides also indicated that characteristics such as being self-confident, being committed to the client, and being concerned about the client's welfare, were necessary for successfully working with clients.

On the other hand, ineffective incidents were associated with lack of understanding and/or knowledge of specific client types and consequently the inability to relate or work effectively with them.

Ineffective incidents were also associated with a negative or discouraged attitude in general, a lack of self-control, or focusing on preconceptions about the client or client environmental conditions.

The majority of the ineffective incidents stated that the end result was negative because the client did not seem interested in improving her situation despite repeated efforts on the part of the aide.

On the basis of these findings, the following are considered major critical job requirements for an EFNEP aide:

- .Working closely and continuously with clients on an individual basis.
- .Utilizing materials that are relevant and understandable to the specific needs of a given client.
- .Exhibiting initiative and being able to take appropriate action needed to help client.
- .Being positive, enthusiastic, persuasive, self-confident, committed and concerned.[5]

.Gaining client's confidence and establish credibility.

.Demonstrating technical knowledge in area of food and nutrition by being able to plan an activity in a manner which transmits nutritional information to clients.

.Determining a client's degree of interest in program objectives at the end of the initial contact.

Implications for Training

Meaningful training for nonprofessionals must be related to the experiences and challenges they perceive operative in the work environment. This is why the critical incident technique is a very valuable tool for identifying relevant training needs. By determining and tabulating the behaviors and attitudes expressed in the effective and ineffective incidents, it becomes obvious which ones are critical and associated with successful actions and which ones are most likely to engender failure. Thus the critical incidents in this study offer to training personnel a realistic base on which to direct training curriculum.

The following examples emphasize some specific training needs apparent from this study.

Because a number of aides admit to negative attitudes when confronted with particularly unsuitable client conditions, there is a need for aides to acquire a sensitivity towards the client independent of the overt physical conditions of the client or the client environment.

Because the recorded ineffective incidents pointed out that aides lack an understanding or knowledge of their specific clients, there is a need to instruct aides in entry approaches which will be meaningful, non-threatening and comfortable to the client.

In addition, not only is EFNEP a people-oriented program where social skills are important, but it is also a program which requires the transmittal of nutritional knowledge to the client through the aides. Although this critical incident study did not generally reveal that the aides felt pedagogical skills were important, we conclude that to obtain the program goals and to minimize on-the-job frustrations for the assistants; their social skill training must be augmented with at least minimal technical training.

Recommendations

(1) Training should be conducted on a one-to-one or very small group basis. The one-to-one basis is viewed as a realistic training situation because this is the manner in which aides interact on the job. In addition, often a shy aide or one needing special attention can easily get lost, confused, or frustrated in a group setting and may not be able to articulate her needs or lack of understanding. Needless to say these characteristics are more often than not imposed on the client. It is recognized that although the one-to-one approach will initially be more time consuming, it normally proves more profitable because a well trained employee tends to demand less personal attention from her supervisor.

Although it would be necessary to incorporate theoretical supplements to each training session to shore up knowledge gaps, the major training approach should consist of the integration of problem-solving experiences concerned with how to teach nutritional education and role simulation activities dealing with human relation skill development.

Through utilization of this method trainees would be provided with an opportunity to involve themselves and interact with situations simulated from actual encounters that other assistants have successfully or unsuccessfully negotiated in the field. Hopefully, at the end of this type of training experience, aides would have a more secure base for understanding the client needs and reactions in the context of the environment in which they occur.

It is most probable that the nonprofessional will become more and more similar to the professional the longer she works and the more training she assimilates. This might mean a loss of identification with the community. However, we do not feel this would detract from the primary reason for hiring indigenous workers. Riessman states and we concur: "The issue is not whether the NP identifies with the poor or not but whether he remains committed to them."[6]

Riessman further states: "Many professionals express great concern about nonprofessionals losing their community ties, their feelings for the neighborhood, and their identification with "the people." This is based on the obvious fact that nonprofessionals are no longer simply members of the community, but are now employed by an agency. Moreover, since career lines may develop, the nonprofessionals can anticipate moving up the ladder, and, in some cases, becoming professionals."[7] We agree this should be the ultimate goal for employing the nonprofessional if community development is to take place other than through the mere construction of "new" or "modern" facilities.

(2) Any training program for nonprofessionals should focus attention on not only involving the trainees, but all levels of staff responsible for the success of the program. This too is viewed as a prime requirement

by the aides themselves. Obviously, without support of organizational personnel, no program can be operationally effective. Leonard Nadler recently stated: "One element to which we must turn our attention is to the development of systems within the organization to support the training experience"... "Such systems will not emerge automatically, and unless planned as part of a total system they could even nullify the training effort."[8]

Nadler further suggests, and we agree, that one way for the organizational staff to support training activities is to issue a written statement stating their approval of the training proposed so that all other levels of staff are aware of their commitment and approval. Another way to develop support systems is to have appropriate personnel involved in helping to develop the training philosophy and/or the curricula. Still another avenue for developing support systems is to have training to support training. For example, if training is provided for one group of staff members, it is fairly evident that others in the organization must be exposed to the content of the training if they are to understand and relate to the changed behaviors of the trained group.

We feel that the findings from this critical incident study not only shed light on the day-to-day work behaviors and attitudes of an EFNEP aide, but also provide insight into what this nonprofessional is in the work context and more importantly how organizational personnel can support this worker for her enhancement and growth as well as for the enhancement and growth of the community and the Extension Service.

[1]Reissman, Frank, "Strategies and Suggestions for Training Nonprofessionals," Community Mental Health Journal, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer, 1967, p. 104.

[2]The evaluation study was supported by Special Needs Project funds, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Federal Extension Service, and conducted under the auspices of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, College of Agriculture, and the Center for Developmental Change, University of Kentucky.

[3]John C. Flanagan, "The Critical Incident Technique," Psychological Bulletin LI (1954), p. 355.

[4]Frank D. Alexander and Martha Cheney, "Critical Behaviors and Attitudes from Critical Incident Study of Cooperative Extension Agents in New York State (A Preliminary Report)," Office of Extension Studies, New York Cooperative Extension, 1967.

[5]It is recognized that anyone who works with people in an interviewing, teaching, or similar capacity should possess these characteristics. However, the fact that the Extension aides, through this study, also identified these characteristics as being important to their success with clients not only reinforces an already established fact; but, in addition points up the aides' overall perception of their EFNEP role requirement.

[6]Frank Reissman, Strategies Against Poverty, Page 98.

[7]Ibid

[8]Training and Development Journal, October 1971, p. 2.